

Midas

A Greek myth
Retold by OLIVIA COOLIDGE

Midas was king in Phrygia, which is a land in Asia Minor, and he was both powerful and rich. Nevertheless, he was foolish, obstinate, and hasty, without the sense to appreciate good advice.

It happened one time that Dionysus with his dancing nymphs and satyrs passed through Phrygia. As they went, the old, fat Silenus, nodding on an ass, strayed from the others, who danced on without missing him. The ass took his half-conscious master wherever he wanted, until some hours later, as they came to a great rose garden, the old man tumbled off. The King's gardeners found him there and roused him, still sleepy and staggering, not quite sure who or where he was. Since, however, the revels of Dionysus had spread throughout the land, they recognized him as the god's companion and made much of him. They wreathed his neck with roses and, one on each side and one behind, they supported him to the palace and up the steps, while another went to fetch Midas.

The King came out to meet Silenus, overjoyed at the honor done him. He clapped his hands for his servants and demanded such a feast as never was. There was much running to and fro, setting up of tables, fetching of wine, and bringing up of sweet-scented oil. While slaves festooned the hall with roses and made garlands for the feasters, Midas conducted his guest to the bath with all honor, that he might refresh himself and put on clean garments for the feast.

A magnificent celebration followed. For ten days, by daylight and by torchlight, the palace of the King stood open, and all the notables of Phrygia came up and down its steps. There were sounds of lyre and pipe and singing. There was dancing. Everywhere the scent of roses and of wine mingled with the costly perfumes of King Midas in the

hot summer air. In ten days' time, as the revels were dying down from sheer exhaustion, Dionysus came in person to seek his friend. When he found how Silenus had been entertained and honored, he was greatly pleased and promised Midas any gift he cared to name, no matter what it was.

The King thought a little, glancing back through his doors at the chaos in his hall of scattered rose petals, overturned tables, bowls for the wine mixing, and drinking cups. It had been a good feast, the sort of feast a king should give, only he was very weary now and could not think. A king should entertain thus and give kingly presents to his guests, cups of beaten gold, such as he had seen once, with lifelike pictures of a hunt running round them, or the golden honeycomb which Daedalus made exactly as though it were the work of bees. Gods, like these guests, should have golden statues. Even a king never had enough.

"Give me," he said to Dionysus suddenly, "the power to turn all I touch to gold."

"That is a rash thing to ask," said Dionysus solemnly. "Think again." But Eastern kings are never contradicted, and Midas only felt annoyed.

"It is my wish," he answered coldly.

Dionysus nodded. "You shall have it," he said. "As you part from me here in the garden, it shall be yours."

Midas was so excited when he came back through the garden that he could not make up his mind what to touch first. Presently he decided on the branch of an oak tree which overhung his path. He took a look at it first, counting the leaves, noticing the little veins in them, the jagged edges, the fact that one of them had been eaten half away. He put out his hand to break it off. He never saw it change. One moment it was brown and green; the next it wasn't. There it was, stiff and shining, nibbled leaf and all. It was hard and satisfyingly heavy and far more natural than anything Daedalus ever made.

Now he was the greatest king in the world. Midas looked down at the grass he was walking over. It was still green; the touch was evidently in his hands. He picked up a stone to see; it became a lump of gold. He tried a clod of earth and found himself with another lump. Midas was beside himself with joy; he went into his palace to see what he could do. In the doorway he stopped at a sudden thought. He went outside again and walked down all the long row of pillars, laying his hands on each one. No king in the world had pillars of solid gold. He

considered having a gold house but rejected the idea; the gold pillars looked better against the stone. Midas picked a gold apple and went inside again to eat.

His servants set his table for him, and he amused himself by turning the cups and dishes into gold. He touched the table too by mistake — not that it really mattered, but he would have to be careful. Absently he picked up a piece of bread and bit it and nearly broke his teeth. Midas sat with the golden bread in his hand and looked at it a long time. He was horribly frightened. "I shall have to eat it without touching it with my hands," he said to himself after a while, and he put his head down on the table and tried that way. It was no good. The moment his lips touched the bread, he felt it turn hard and cold. In his shock he groped wildly for his winecup and took a big gulp. The stuff flowed into his mouth all right, but it wasn't wine any more. He spat it out hastily before he choked himself. This time he was more than frightened; he was desperate. "Great Dionysus," he prayed earnestly with uplifted hands, "forgive my foolishness, and take away your gift."

"Go to the mountain of Tmolus," said the voice of the god into his ear, "and bathe in the stream that springs there so that the golden touch may be washed away. The next time think more carefully before you set your judgment against that of the gods."

Midas thanked the god with his whole heart, but he paid more attention to his promise than to his advice. He lost no time in journeying to the mountain and dipping himself in the stream. There the golden touch was washed away from Midas, but the sand of the river bottom shone bright gold as the power passed into the water, so that the stream flowed over golden sand from that time on.

Midas had learned his lesson in a way but was still conceited. He had realized at least that gold was not the most important thing. Indeed, having had too much gold at one time, he took a violent dislike to it and to luxury in general. He spent his time in the open country now, listening to the music of the streams and the woodlands, while his kingdom ran itself as best it might. He wanted neither his elaborate palace, his embroidered robes, his splendid feasts, nor his trained dancers and musicians. Instead he wished to be at home in the woodlands with simple things that were natural and unspoiled.

It happened at the time that in the woods of Tmolus, the goat-god Pan had made himself a pipe. It was a simple hollow reed with holes for stops cut in it, and the god played simple tunes on it like birdcalls and the various noises of the animals he had heard. Only he was very

skillful and could play them fast and slow, mixed together or repeated, until the listener felt that the woods themselves were alive with little creatures. The birds and beasts made answer to the pipe so that it seemed the whole wood was an orchestra of music. Midas himself was charmed to ecstasy with the beauty of it and begged the shaggy god to play hour by hour till the very birds were weary of the calls. This Pan was quite ready to do, since he was proud of his invention. He even wanted to challenge Apollo himself, sure that any judge would put his instrument above Apollo's golden lyre.

Apollo accepted the challenge, and Tmolus, the mountain, was himself to be the judge. Tmolus was naturally a woodland god and friendly to Pan, so he listened with solemn pleasure as the pipe trilled airs more varied and more natural than it had ever played before. The woods echoed, and the happy Midas, who had followed Pan to the contest, was almost beside himself with delight at the gaiety and abandon of it all. When, however, Tmolus heard Apollo play the music of gods and heroes, of love, longing, heroism, and the mighty dead, he forgot his own woods around him and the animals listening in their tiny nests and holes. He seemed to see into the hearts of men and understand the pity of their lives and the beauty that they longed for.

Even after the song had died away, Tmolus sat there in forgetful silence with his thoughts on the loves and struggles of the ages and the half-dried tears on his cheeks. There was a great quiet around him too, he realized, as he came to his senses. Even Pan had put down his pipe thoughtfully on the grass.

Tmolus gave the prize to Apollo, and in the whole woodland there was no one to protest but Midas. Midas had shut his ears to Apollo; he would neither listen nor care. Now he forgot where he was and in whose presence. All he remembered was that he was a great king who always gave his opinion and who, his courtiers told him, was always right. Leaping up, he protested loudly to Tmolus and was not even quiet when the mountain silently frowned on him. Getting no answer, he turned to Apollo, still objecting furiously to the unfairness of the judgment.

Apollo looked the insistent mortal up and down. "The fault is in your ears, O King. We must give them their true shape," he said. With that he turned away and was gone to Olympus, while the unfortunate Midas put his hands to his ears and found them long and furry. He could even wriggle them about. Apollo had given him asses' ears in punishment for his folly.

From that time on King Midas wore a scarlet turban and tried to make it seem as though wearing this were a privilege that only the king could enjoy. He wore it day and night—he was so fond of it. Presently, however, his hair began to grow so long and straggly that something had to be done. The royal barber had to be called.

The barber of King Midas was a royal slave, so it was easy enough to threaten him with the most horrible punishment if, whether waking or sleeping, he ever let fall the slightest hint of what was wrong with the King. The barber was thoroughly frightened. Unfortunately he was too frightened, and the King's threats preyed on his mind. He began to dream he had told his secret to somebody, and what was worse, his fellow servants began to complain that he was making noises in his sleep, so that he was desperately afraid he would talk. At last it seemed that if he could only tell somebody once and get it over, his mind would be at rest. Yet tell somebody was just what he dared not do. Finally, he went down to a meadow which was seldom crossed because it was waterlogged, and there, where he could see there was no one around to hear him, he dug a hole in the ground, put his face close down, and whispered into the wet mud, "King Midas has asses' ears." Then he threw some earth on top and went away, feeling somehow much relieved.

Nothing happened for a while except that the hole filled up with water. Presently, though, some reeds began to grow in it. They grew taller and rustled as the wind went through them. After a while someone happened to go down that way and came racing back, half-amused and half-terrified. Everyone crowded around to listen to him. It was certainly queer, but it was a bit amusing too.

Everybody streamed down the path to investigate. Sure enough, as they came close to it, they could hear the whole thing distinctly. The reeds were not rustling in the wind; they were whispering to one another, "King Midas has asses' ears . . . asses' ears . . . asses' ears."

How does this myth humanize nature? How does it give a divine shape to nature? What does the myth-maker seem to say about human nature?

Requiem for a Modern Croesus

To him the moon was a silver dollar, spun
Into the sky by some mysterious hand; the sun
Was a gleaming golden coin—
His to purloin;
The freshly minted stars were dimes of delight
Flung out upon the counter of the night.

In yonder room he lies,
With pennies on his eyes.

LEW SARETT

Croesus was an extremely rich king whose name has come to be associated with great wealth. What metaphors did this dead man believe in? How was he another Midas?

What metamorphoses does every human being experience?

Pygmalion

A Greek myth

OID, translated by MARY M. INNES

more happy
at wedding

When Pygmalion saw these women, living such wicked lives, he was revolted by the many faults which nature has implanted in the female sex, and long lived a bachelor existence, without any wife to share his home. But meanwhile, with marvelous artistry, he skillfully carved a snowy ivory statue. He made it lovelier than any woman born, and fell in love with his own creation. The statue had all the appearance of a real girl, so that it seemed to be alive, to want to move, did not modesty forbid, so cleverly did his art conceal its art. Pygmalion gazed in wonder, and in his heart there rose a passionate love for this image of a human form. Often he ran his hands over the work, feeling it to see whether it was flesh or ivory, and would not yet admit that ivory was all it was. He kissed the statue, and imagined that it kissed him back, spoke to it and embraced it, and thought he felt his fingers sink into the limbs he touched, so that he was afraid lest a bruise appear where he had pressed the flesh. Sometimes he addressed it in flattering speeches, sometimes brought the kind of presents that girls enjoy: shells and polished pebbles, little birds and flowers of a thousand hues, lilies and painted balls, and drops of amber which fall from the trees that were once Phaethon's sisters. He dressed the limbs of his statue in woman's robes, and put rings on its fingers, long necklaces round its neck. Pearls hung from its ears, and chains were looped upon its breast. All this finery became the image well, but it was no less lovely unadorned. Pygmalion then placed the statue on a couch that was covered with cloths of Tyrian purple, laid its head to rest on soft down pillows, as if it could appreciate them, and called it his bedfellow.

The festival of Venus, which is celebrated with the greatest pomp all through Cyprus, was now in progress, and heifers, their crooked

prayed, saying: "If you gods can give all things, may I have as my wife, I pray—" he did not dare to say: "the ivory maiden," but finished: "one like the ivory maid." However, golden Venus, present at her festival in person, understood what his prayers meant, and as a sign that the gods were kindly disposed, the flames burned up three times, shooting a tongue of fire into the air. When Pygmalion returned home, he made straight for the statue of the girl he loved, leaned over the couch, and kissed her. She seemed warm: he laid his lips on hers again, and touched her breast with his hands—at his touch the ivory lost its hardness, and grew soft: his fingers made an imprint on the yielding surface, just as wax melts in the sun and, worked by men's fingers, is fashioned into many different shapes, and made fit for use by being used. The lover stood, amazed, afraid of being mistaken, his joy tempered with doubt, and again and again stroked the object of his prayers. It was indeed a human body! The veins throbbed as he pressed them with his thumb. Then Pygmalion of Paphos was eloquent in his thanks to Venus. At long last, he pressed his lips upon living lips, and the girl felt the kisses he gave her, and blushed. Timidly raising her eyes, she saw her lover and the light of day together. The goddess Venus was present at the marriage she had arranged and, when the moon's horns had nine times been rounded into a full circle, Pygmalion's bride bore a child, Paphos, from whom the island takes its name.

How is this a story of wish fulfillment? Why do you think the idea of metamorphosis would have such a powerful appeal to the imagination?

As illustrated in the drawing that opens this unit, we are aware of two kinds of metamorphosis—that which we can control and that which we cannot control. We cannot stop a girl from growing into a woman, or a caterpillar from becoming a butterfly. But—if we want to—we can use our imagination to change a wolf into a bird or a bird into a wolf. List five things that you would shape-change if you could. List five things that shape-change whether you want them to or not.

me. Evry body feels sorry at the factery and I dont want that eather so Im going someplace where nobody knows that Charlie Gordon was once a genius and now he cant even reed a book or rite good.

Im taking a cuple of books along and even if I cant reed them Ill practise hard and maybe I wont forget every thing I lerned. If I try reel hard maybe Ill be a littel bit smarter than I was before the operashun. I got my rabbits foot and my luky penny and maybe they will help me.

If you ever reed this Miss Kinnian dont be sorry for me Im glad I got a second chanse to be smart becaus I lerned a lot of things that I never even new were in this world and Im grateful that I saw it all for a littel bit. I dont know why Im dumb agen or what I did wrong maybe its becaus I dint try hard enuff. But if I try and practis very hard maybe Ill get a littel smarter and know what all the words are. I remember a littel bit how I had a nice feeling with the blue book that has the torn cover when I red it. Thats why Im gonna keep trying to get smart so I can have that feeling agen. Its a good feeling to know things and be smart. I wish I had it rite now if I did I would sit down and reed all the time. Anyway I bet Im the first dumb person in the world who ever found out something important for sience. I remember I did something but I dont remember what. So I gess its like I did it for all the dumb pepul like me.

Good-by Miss Kinnian and Dr Strauss and everybody. And P.S. please tell Dr Nemur not be such a grouch when pepul laff at him and he would have more frends. Its easy to make frends if you let pepul laff at you. Im going to have lots of frends where I go. P.P.S. Please if you get a chanse put some flowers on Algernons grave in the bak-yard. . . .

What kind of metamorphosis does this modern story describe? Who are the gods in this story? Are they like Zeus or Prometheus (page 32)? Are they like Clarke's crystal slab (page 57), or Twain's Mysterious Stranger (page 39)?

How is this a story about the death of childhood? Why does Fanny Girden remind Charlie of the story of Eve and the snake?

"No one I've ever known is what he appears to be on the surface." Could Charlie's statement suggest that life consists of many kinds of metamorphoses?

Narcissus

A Greek myth

Retold by JAY MACPHERSON

As beautiful as Adonis was the ill-fated Narcissus, who from his childhood was loved by all who saw him but whose pride would let him love no one in return. At last one of those who had hopelessly courted him turned and cursed him, exclaiming: "May he suffer as we have suffered! May he too love in vain!" The avenging goddess Nemesis heard and approved this prayer.

There was nearby a clear pool, with shining silvery waters. No shepherd had ever come there, nor beast nor bird nor falling branch marred its surface: the grass grew fresh and green around it, and the sheltering woods kept it always cool from the midday sun.

Here once came Narcissus, heated and tired from the chase, and lay down by the pool to drink. As he bent over the water, his eyes met the eyes of another young man, gazing up at him from the depths of the pool. Deluded by his reflection, Narcissus fell in love with the beauty that was his own. Without thought of food or rest he lay beside the pool addressing cries and pleas to the image, whose lips moved as he spoke but whose reply he could never catch. Echo came by, the most constant of his disdained lovers. She was a nymph who had once angered Hera, the wife of Zeus, by talking too much, and in consequence was deprived of the use of her tongue for ordinary conversation: all she could do was repeat the last words of others. Seeing Narcissus lying there, she pleaded with him in his own words. "I will die unless you pity me," cried Narcissus to his beloved. "Pity me," cried Echo as vainly to hers. Narcissus never raised his eyes to her at all, though she remained day after day beside him on the bank, pleading as well as she was able. At last she pined away, withering and wasting with unrequited love, till nothing was left of her but her voice, which the traveler still hears calling unexpectedly in woods and waste places.

As for the cruel Narcissus, he fared no better. The face that looked back at him from the water became pale, thin, and haggard, till at last poor Echo caught and repeated his last "Farewell!" But when she came with the other nymphs to lament over his body, it was nowhere to be found. Instead, over the pool bent a new flower, white with a yellow center, which they called by his name. From this flower the Furies, the avengers of guilt, twist garlands to bind their hateful brows.

Try to rewrite this myth in a recognizable modern setting. What will you do with the metamorphosis at the end?

Sonnet One

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripener should by time decrease,
His tender heir might bear his memory.
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content
And, tender churl, makest waste in niggarding.
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

How is this poem a warning to another Narcissus?